

Robert Gates Is Front-Runner For CIA Post

Webster's Resignation Gives Bush the Opportunity To Name Close Associate

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WASHINGTON — Central Intelligence Agency Director William Webster resigned, giving President Bush a chance to name a close associate as the nation's chief intelligence official and to reshape his national security team.

Administration officials said the leading contender to succeed Mr. Webster, who was appointed by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, is Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates, a former deputy CIA chief. Also reportedly under consideration is James Lilley, ambassador to China, another former CIA official and a friend of the president. Officials say Mr. Bush also may be considering former intelligence official Bobby Inman, and surprise candidates such as New Hampshire Republican Sen. Warren Rudman.



William Webster

Mr. Gates wants the top intelligence job, officials say. He was nominated for the post before Mr. Webster, but withdrew his name because of criticism that he failed to halt secret arms sales to Iran during the Reagan years. Officials predict his cause is likely to be boosted by National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, with whom he has worked exceptionally closely since the beginning of the Bush administration.

Asked about a Gates appointment, the president said, "I haven't considered successors yet," but he called Mr. Gates "a worthy man" and said, "We all have great respect for him."

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren (D., Okla.), who was a critic of Mr. Gates in 1987, said, "If the president were to nominate Bob Gates, my inclination would be to support him." He said that the Iran scandal investigations "never found anything that raised ques-

tions about his [Mr. Gates'] involvement." Sen. William Cohen (R., Maine), who is influential on intelligence issues, also said, "I think Gates should get the job."

Mr. Bush said the Webster resignation was the 67-year-old CIA chief's idea, and was made final in a telephone call Tuesday night. At an early morning news conference yesterday, the president went out of his way to stress that Mr. Webster wasn't being forced out.

"He has done a superb job," the president declared. "I hate to see him go." He said the departure was unrelated to any criticism of the intelligence community performance during the Persian Gulf war, asserting that "the intelligence was outstanding and the community performed fantastically." He declared, "I have no complaints whatsoever about the quality of our intelligence."

In an interview, Mr. Webster, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation director and longtime federal judge, said, "I can tell you categorically that no one has suggested to me that it was time to go, certainly not the president or anyone acting on his behalf."

He said he acted for personal reasons, including a desire to practice law. But he also added that, ever since Mr. Bush asked him following the 1988 election to remain at the CIA, "I knew that at some point he would probably like to invigorate his own administration by appointing someone of his own choice."

Mr. Webster said he wanted to move now because "the war has just been completed, we're adjusting to a very different kind of world, and I am coming up on four years in the job" May 26.

CIA officials praised Mr. Webster for improving the government's efforts against terrorism, narcotics dealing, and foreign spying.

Nevertheless, the resignation comes at a time when private sniping at Mr. Webster is mounting. Mr. Scowcroft and other White House officials privately have been critical of the low-key intelligence boss, who is seen as too close to Congress and insufficiently aggressive.

The Washington Post _____
The New York Times _____
The Washington Times _____
The Wall Street Journal **A 16** _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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Mr. Webster's strong support in Congress has faded a bit in recent months as well. The CIA has been criticized for failing to flatly predict Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and Mr. Webster wasn't a visible figure in the planning and conduct of the war.

There have been news reports based on these criticisms, but the president himself has supported Mr. Webster repeatedly. Mr. Bush, who was a cautious figure himself during his own tenure at the CIA in the 1970s, said yesterday that he doesn't believe the CIA chief should seek to assert himself as a policy maker.

Both congressional intelligence committees currently are mounting efforts to reorganize the spy agencies Mr. Webster oversees, with the aim in part of creating a stronger director's post. Rep. David McCurdy (D., Okla.), chairman of the house panel, praised Mr. Webster for starting to move the agency in the right direction. But he said, "It probably is an appropriate time to hand over the reins to someone else as we head into reorganization."

Mr. Webster was widely praised yesterday as honest and willing to accept congressional oversight, in contrast to his predecessor, William Casey.